

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 175

SO 015 794

AUTHOR Rasinski, Timothy V.
TITLE A Model of Collaboration in a Curricular Program.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (68th, New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aging (Individuals); Career Awareness; Communication Skills; *Cooperation; Curriculum Development; *Experiential Learning; Grade 8; Group Activities; Interpersonal Relationship; Junior High Schools; Learning Activities; Models; *Older Adults; Oral History; Program Descriptions; *School Community Relationship; Student Attitudes; Student Participation

IDENTIFIERS *Intergenerational Programs

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a curriculum model designed to incorporate the concept of collaboration through a student partnership program with retired persons. This descriptive study is based upon on-hand observations by the author during the course of the program. Thirty eighth-grade students were paired with retired persons who lived in a retirement village. The students collaborated with their partners in a number of tasks, focusing primarily on relationship building. Through a mixture of classroom and field experiences, student activities centered around the themes of communication, history, the aging process, and careers. Specific activities included oral history interviews, daily journal keeping, movie viewing with partners, large and small group discussions, communication training, readings, reports, simulation, a book-binding project, and party planning. Students received English and history credit for their participation in the six-week partnership program. This curriculum is viewed from the perspectives of academic coursework and collaboration, relationship building and collaboration, and caring and collaboration. Evaluations of the program were positive on an academic as well as an affective and attitudinal basis. Collaboration allowed the children in this program to gain a different view of history, improve communication and listening skills, and learn to cooperate and work with others.
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"A Model of Collaboration in a Curricular Program"

Timothy V. Rasinski
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio 43210

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, April, 1984

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Abstract

This paper presents a description of a curriculum model that incorporates the concept of collaboration in a very intense, intimate, and meaningful way. This descriptive study is based upon on-hand observations by the author during the course of the program. In this model eighth-grade students were paired with retired persons who lived in a retirement village. The students collaborated with their partners in a number of tasks. They received English and History credit for their participation in the six week partnership program. This curriculum is viewed from the perspectives of academic coursework and collaboration, relationship building and collaboration, and caring and collaboration. Evaluations of the program were and have been very positive on an academic as well as an affective and attitudinal basis.

Collaboration is a purposeful process that can take a variety of forms. It can vary by purpose or function and it can vary by the level at which it is enacted. For example, collaboration can be employed for research, evaluation, or pedagogical purposes. At the same, in an educational setting, it may be a strategy that is used among teachers, among students, among administrators, between teachers and students, or in some other combination of players.

This paper is a description of a rather unique in-use curricular program that employs the collaborative paradigm in a not so typical way. The purposes of the program and of the collaboration integrate notions of traditional pedagogy and curricular content, as well as social responsibility and altruism. The levels at which collaboration exist in this program are several, but the main collaborative focus is between the students and certain members of the local community. My purposes in this presentation are to: 1) describe the program as I have recently observed it, 2) reflect on the notion of collaboration as it is used, and 3) give a brief word on the evaluation of the program.

Around the turn of the century, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the existing way that American schools educated the nation's children. Jane Addams, the noted social worker, expressed this discontent when she wrote:

"We are impatient with the schools which lay stress on reading and writing, suspecting them to rest upon the assumption that all knowledge and interest must

be brought to the children through the medium of books. Such an assumption fails to give the child any clue to the life about him or any power to use-fully or intelligently connect himself with it (1902)

Addams felt that in order for the school to become a force for social improvement it would have to become involved in the life of the real world and exert its own influence toward the humanizing of the system. The program I am about to describe to you serves both purposes, and serves them well. It is a program of learning, basic academic learning and it is a program of human understanding and human caring. I observed this collaborative program through its 6 week course. The title of the program bears a collaborative flair. It is called the Jones Middle School -- First Community Village Partnership Program. Every year approximately 30 8th graders are voluntarily accepted into the six week course. The course is a unique mixture of classroom time and field experience with the older partners at the First Community retirement village, however, the undeniable focus is on relationship building.

Let me take you through a week's activities. Most of the student responses that I quote come from their daily journal entries which were a required part of the course. Mondays usually found the students in a classroom session at the school for the 90 minute period. This time was spent preparing the students for the upcoming week with their partners at the village and dealing with one of several issues involved in aging and relationship building. In the 1st part of this period the teachers introduced the S's to the assignments for the week. They also helped

the students work through questions they might ask their partners, pictures or artifacts they might share with the partners, and tips for handling unexpected situations, such as what to do if the partner had a hearing difficulty or become ill during the meeting.

The Monday class was also a time for exploring important issues related to older people. On one occasion the medical director of Village gave a presentation and fielded questions concerning health problems associated with aging. On another Monday the students saw a historical film about the 1920's from which a lively discussion on the topic ensued. A session on careers was also on a Monday. In this particular session the students met with a panel of staff members from the village who represented a variety of occupations.

The middle three days of the week embraced the heart of the program. On Tuesdays and Thursdays the students met with their partners at the retirement center. The students were assigned to a partner on either a one-to-one or two-students-to-one-partner basis. The students went directly to their partner's apartment or room. The meetings between the students and the older adults were in no way unstructured or unplanned tea parties, social events, or excercises in conversational etiquette. Each meeting had it's own particular theme that the students were expected to focus on for at least a portion of their meeting. In one meeting the theme was families and tradition. In anoter meeting the students did a history interview with their partners. This was later turned into a written report. Immediately after their visits with their

partners the students gathered in small groups for short debriefing sessions with one of the teachers. During this time, the student's quickly reviewed their visit and noted any problems or highlights. The teachers tried to help the student's work through and understand the problems and celebrated their highs. One not uncommon problem was having a partner who didn't talk a lot. One boy wrote in his daily journal "The only problem was when with about ten minutes left we totally ran out of things to say so she put on this really boring record. We acted like we were interested and then we left." A truly significant event was having a partner share a very personal moment or memory with a student. One student wrote, "Mrs. D did suffer during the depression. She lost her farm and a lot of things. It was sadder than ever today. We talked about death and things. We couldn't get off the subject." Many students, as is natural, felt uneasy with too much silence. A student wrote: "We had a great talk up until we asked her if her family was affected by the depression and she could not remember when or what it was." Another student came to the point when she said "The thing that scares me the most was silence, I always hate it when I'm talking to someone and then there's silence because I don't know what to say. I feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. But I learned that its ok... and maybe they need time to think about what was said. The discussion made me feel a lot easier about talking to my partners."

Wednesday's was group day at the Village. Students and Villagers gathered in a fairly large meeting room. The students typically sat with their partners. During this time of group sharing and interaction

students and villagers saw a variety of movies. All were either about life in the earlier part of this century or about growing old. The villagers and students were invited after the movies to comment on what they had seen. The villagers were surprisingly candid and indeed enlightening in their reactions and comments. Following a movie about Charlie Chaplin one villager commented that she used to play the piano for silent movies in the theaters. She made \$2.00 a night. Another woman told how the career of actor John Gilbert came to an abrupt end when talkies took over Hollywood. As she put it "he just couldn't talk right."

After the movies and discussion the group adjourned to a small lounge area for refreshments. Here the students met other Villagers and had a chance to chat informally in pairs or in small groups. The week usually ended back in school. Friday was a time to tie the previous week together, look ahead to the next week, discuss assignments, and participate in special activities. One such activity was a disability simulation experience. In it the students "tried on" a variety of disabilities that many older people face. These included sight impairment, hearing loss, arthritis, loss of mental powers, and crippling disabilities. Another Friday activity centered on communication training. The students and teachers brainstormed strategies and tips for communicating and maintaining conversations. The teachers also gave the students some ideas for possible problems they might encounter in trying to communicate, such as what do you do if your partner starts to cry or if your partner becomes angry with you and

tells you to leave his room.

In addition to the visits and activities the students were given a set of required readings, reports, and projects. The readings were a set of articles that dealt with understanding the aging process and with communicating with older people. These articles were the basis for several in-class discussions and the students were given a written examination on the content of the articles.

The students were also required to keep a daily journal of their experiences in this program. The journals were checked and commented upon by the teachers weekly. The students were required to write up their oral history interview with their partners as a formal report. To culminate the disability simulation activity the students were required to simulate a disability outside of school for at least four hours and then write up a report on this experience. In order to get the students to return to their partners after the program ended the teachers initiated a book-binding project. In this project each student actually constructed a book of his or her own which would be presented as a gift to his or her partner. The books could contain poetry, personal anecdotes, pictures, or whatever the students wanted to share with their partners. The project was devised so that the books would not be completed until several weeks after the program itself had ended. This insured that the students maintained some relationship with their partners beyond the formal temporal limits of the program.

As a culminating activity to the 6 week program the students planned, organized, and implemented a party for their partners, parents, teachers and other friends to celebrate their new friendships. This year's theme was Hawaii -- a very nice contrast to Ohio in February. The students, with their teacher's help, planned for speakers, entertainment, food and drinks (which most prepared themselves). They acted as greeters and coat-takers. They made and distributed name tags and they decorated the party room at the Village. In short, they planned a party, not only for themselves but for others. During this party I saw a group of surprisingly mature 8th graders be at ease and speak with their older mentors and, with a great deal of pride, introduce them to their own parents. This was the same group that appeared so cautious and tentative only six weeks earlier. As one of the Villagers who made a brief speech at the party told the students, "you came, you saw, and you conquered us".

Throughout the program, in the activities, projects and discussions the students participated in, a number of overt learning themes or subjects seemed to emerge and run through the six weeks. One theme was communication. Students were given many, many opportunities to communicate with themselves and others. Obviously this occurred during the partner visitations. But it also occurred during the journal writing, the report making, the party planning, the class discussions as well as specific training sessions in communication skills and other activities. The language arts were emphasized through written and oral expression as well as written and oral reception in natural situations.

History was another overt theme. The students could not help be around their partners and their momentos and pictures and memories without getting a personal sense of life in the early 20th century. Understanding the aged and the aging process and sensitizing the young to the problems and joys of aging was also a focal point to the program. Students not only read about getting old but interacted fairly closely with people who had reached this stage of life. Learning about careers too was an important part of the curriculum for this program. The students were exposed to a variety of careers in the Village itself as well as learning about the careers and occupations of their partners. Beneath this overt curriculum however lies a curriculum that is less obvious on a brief initial glance. It is a hidden curriculum that I see as the real power to this program. Just as every architectural achievement that strikes the eye must have a foundation to allow the superstructure to stand, this program has a foundation that supports and enriches what is seen. The next section of this paper considers one of these covert but fundamental themes of this program. Specifically the notion of collaboration will be addressed.

COLLABORATION

Teaching and learning are very often considered individual/personal processes or acts. Teachers, in general, rarely consult with others who might have some special knowledge or insight, let alone act in a collaborative or joint way with others. Even more pronounced is the way in which many educators and the general public expect school learning to

take place. Children are expected to learn in isolation from one another. Talking among classmates, and small group work is very often considered to be wrong, an indication of cheating or learning the easy way. Kids who work in groups, who collaborate with classmates, do so in order to get others to do their own work for them.

If disdain for collaboration in schooling is the rule then the Jones-Village Partnership Program is in serious trouble. This program is fraught with collaboration at a variety of levels and for a variety of purposes.

The most interesting areas of collaboration seem to me to occur between the students and their Village partners. The entire focus of the program is on the collaboration and relationship that develop between these two groups. The nature of the program requires the students and their partners to collaborate on a number of tasks. The students are forced to learn to collaborate. Indeed, their completion of the program is dependent upon their successful collaborative efforts with their partners.

I would like to speak to three aspects of collaboration that I observed in this program. These are collaboration and the academic subject areas, collaboration and the development of personal relationships and community, and collaboration and the development of altruism or caring.

Collaboration and Academic Subjects

Because the students are pulled from their traditional classes at the school in order to participate in this program, the program must in various ways make up for this loss of instructional time. The partnership program gives academic credit for English and Social Studies and the students earn such credit through the various collaborative tasks that they are assigned. In addition to their 3 weekly visits with their partners, the students had to keep a journal of reflections on their collaborative experiences, read several articles dealing with history, gerontology, and careers, and complete a book-making and bookbinding project to gain the credits. Also, the students were required to write reports on oral history interviews they conducted with their partners and on the disability simulation exercise.

All of these tasks begged for collaboration between the students and their Village partners. For example, the book-binding project was a culminating activity that reflected the experiences the students shared with their partners. The disability exercise gave students the opportunity to learn about any health problems that their partners may have. The students were encouraged to discuss their assigned articles read with their partners in order to gain new insights into what they had read. Perhaps the one set of tasks that required the most direct collaboration were the oral history interviews and reports.

In these interviews and reports the students were entirely

dependent upon their partners for the contents of their reports. What the students and their partners came up with is a picture of history that is very much different and much more personal than what the students would find in a textbook. Some of the students' entries in their journals give a flavor of what they experienced in these interviews. One boy wrote that during his interview "She told me a story about one bank that closed because of the depression, so, everyone flocked to her father's bank to take their money out before it went under. Her father jumped on the counter and gave a big speech trying to convince them not to take their money out. Only a few took it out, so they were OK. She also said that one day you could see a really successful person, the next day that same person could be selling apples on the street." Another student got a very personal picture of history that showed this student that history also has an affective dimension. In her journal this student wrote, "I went to visit Mrs. F. and give the history interview. I loved it. She was great. I only got through six questions but I got great answers... The thing that interested me was the fact that Mrs. F. hated FDR, she thought he was a criminal but her husband loved him and so they never really talked about politics very much."

For these children collaboration made history more than a set of facts or a generic description of global events. History became perceptions and feelings as well as facts. History became personal stories of how global events of a half century ago touched the lives of people sitting across from them. The children learned how it felt to

lose your farm or to send a loved one off to war. In a real sense these students touched history. As one student put it "Having these people tell me what it was like to live through the wars and the Depression has helped me more than any text ever could..."

Collaboration and the Development of Relationships

A major goal of the program is to help children learn to develop mature relationships with people other than their peers. As we all know, developing and nurturing relationships is not easily done outside of a context of face to face contact. Building relationships requires personal contact and personal collaboration among the actors. This program, by providing that collaborative environment, set the stage for relationships to develop between the students and the Villagers. And indeed this is just what happened.

A large portion of the students' own journal writing talks about relationships. Early entries reflected student fears concerning not having anything to say to their partners or talking about subjects that were too personal. One girl asked, "What do you say or not say when they begin to talk about dying -- not just a family member but about themselves?" She was obviously concerned about subjects that one would share only with someone who was trusted and a friend. Evidently this relationship did grow. Later, this same girl wrote in her journal, "Then we began to talk about families, she brought up the subject of her husband and she began to tell me how he died right at her feet from a

heart attack and then how she had to tell her daughter (who was 12 at the time) that daddy died. I was so scared she was going to cry but she didn't." Another student wrote this after a visit with her partner, "I had no trouble talking. It was like she was my grandmother. I really hated having to leave. When I first got there I was thinking how I could sit there for 45 minutes, I thought I'd run out of things to say but after I got there there wasn't enough time for us to talk".

Throughout my observations I noted many examples of students and Villagers especially sharing very personal stories, pictures, and treasured momentos of their past and their loved ones with their partners. For example, 84 year old Mrs. W. shared a picture of her 1st grade class from 1906, a 1911 photo of her family in the Model T, and an obviously treasured picture of her parents with her young partner. To me this is a sign of relationships that are developing. One young and very bright boy who had problems developing friendships with his peers at school developed a very warm relationship with her partner who was specifically matched with this boy because of her wisdom and powers of nurturance. This boy learned much more about relationship building from this woman than he would ever had learned had he remained at school.

Perhaps the best sign of flowered relationships are those friendships that continue beyond the temporal limits of the program. I was told by teachers and villagers alike that many students regularly visit their partners. In fact several students have been returning to their partners for a number of years.

Collaboration and Caring

A notion closely associated with the concept of relationship building is that of the development of caring or altruism. The development of a warm and secure relationship implies a commitment to caring by both parties.

Another important goal for this program is the development of altruism in the students. Bronfenbrenner suggests that caring can develop only where there is contact between individuals. Caring requires the personal contact between the one caring and the one cared for. Given such an assumption, caring then requires collaborative activity. This program provides the collaborative context that permits caring to occur.

Altruism is something that is not easily measured nor easily observed when the types of caring one expects to occur is quite subtle. Still there does seem to be some suggestion that these children were indeed learning to care for others.

One student when asked what he had learned from this program answered simply, "I have been learning how to listen." Listening requires a person to change one's focus away from one's self and onto another. Listening is a fundamental component of collaboration. For

many students being there to just listen to the stories that the villagers had to tell was an act of caring.

Another sign of caring was seen in the zest and dedication with which the students planned and carried out the party and made their books for their partners. I was especially impressed by the way in which so many of the students eagerly introduced and shared their partners with their parents at the party. It seemed as if the students wanted to include their partners as a member of their family.

Caring itself was not totally manifested in one or two separate acts or activities. It cannot be isolated into discrete instances of caring. Instead, the full notion of caring as it developed in this program seemed to develop in concert with the relationships between the students' and villagers. The students willingness to listen, the sharing between partners, the exchange of phone calls when a partner was ill, the shifting into a more mature behavior pattern by the student in the presence of the partner are all small but forceful signs that these students did grow in learning to care.

Evaluation

The success or failure of such a program as this is difficult to measure in immediate paper and pencil assessments. Hopefully, the positive efforts of this program will last throughout the students' lifetimes. Still, pre-and post-tests given to the students during one

year indicated that the program was contributing to some very positive shifts in student attitudes. Specifically, the tests were strongly suggestive of less negative and fearful attitudes of the students toward aging and a greater appreciation, warmth, and empathy toward older persons. The students were also better able to separate facts from myths about aging and demonstrated a better understanding of the physical and psychological aspects of aging. Participants from both student and resident groups tended to express an unconditional high regard for the program.

To conclude, is collaboration a worthwhile pedagogical process. Is there something to be gained through collaboration of this type that wouldn't otherwise be gained? I think yes. Collaboration allowed the children in this program to gain an emic view of history, it allowed them to improve their communication and listening skills with others in real life situations, and most importantly, I feel, it gave these children an opportunity to learn how to cooperate, to work with others, indeed to care for others. These are things that might not have happened in the traditional textbook and individualized world of the eighth-grade classroom.

References

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